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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 000036

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DEPT FOR EAP/CM, DRL/IRF
NSC FOR WILDER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/03/2018

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SUBJECT: SARA VM WANG DISCUSSES PARTY VIEW ON RELIGION,
UPCOMING VISITS

Classified By: Ambassador Clark T. Randt, Jr.; Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) The Ambassador hosted State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) Vice Minister Wang Zuoan for a January 3 lunch. VM Wang said experts briefed Politburo members about trends in religious development at a December 18 "collective study" session. President Hu also spoke at the December 18 session, emphasizing the positive role of religion in promoting social stability and harmony. Wang said that President Hu's speech urges support for religious organizations to train more qualified clergy. Wang said that China and the Vatican "should be able to reach agreement" on issues blocking normalization but that the timing of normalization is not tied to the Olympics. Wang acknowledged the rapid growth of Protestantism and Buddhism and the widespread practice of folk religion in China. In response to the Ambassador's inquiry regarding conditions for Chinese Protestants, Wang said the problem of church registration is more complicated than it is portrayed in Western media. Wang and SARA Minister Ye iaowen may both visit the United States in 2008. On January 8, the China Christian Council (CCC) will open meetings to appoint new leaders. End Summary.

Politburo Collective Study on Religious Work; Party Views
Religion Positively

2. (C) On January 3, the Ambassador hosted SARA VM Wang Zuoan for lunch. Wang said he attended the Politburo's December 18 collective study session on religious work, the 47th in a series of monthly study sessions to brief Politburo members on wide-ranging issues in Chinese society. Two religious affairs experts, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Zhuo Xingping and Beijing Central Ethnic University's Mou Zhongjian, gave lectures. Politburo members then participated in a discussion and heard President Hu Jintao's "comprehensive speech." Wang noted that Hu's speech received wide media coverage and that outside observers parsed the speech for new meaning. In reality, Wang said, the speech merely explains the portion of President Hu's 17th Party Congress report mentioning religion and affirms the Communist Party's positive view of religion. In the past, Wang said, the Party viewed religion negatively.

3. (C) The 17th Party Congress discussed the positive role of religion in the development of society, including religion's role in promoting social harmony. Religion, Wang said, can make a special contribution to social harmony by encouraging charitable endeavors. "Government can't do everything," Wang said, and China needs to gradually establish a "society of

citizenship." Wang said he does not worry about the "natural" continued growth and development of the "five official" religions. The biggest challenge China faces in the area of religion, Wang said, is to avoid conflict between believers and non-believers and between adherents of different faiths.

President Hu Supports Religious Training; China Needs More Qualified Clergy

14. (C) Wang said outsiders who have not been to China have difficulty imagining the type of "heresy" that exists in rural areas of China where there are no qualified clergy. Therefore, China's churches must train many more qualified pastors to send to rural areas. A key sentence in President Hu's December 18 speech, Wang said, urges "support for religious organizations to train qualified clergy." China welcomes and encourages religious exchanges between the United States and China that provide training opportunities for Chinese clergy. Wang said many U.S. religious organizations already cooperate with Chinese religious institutions to promote theological education and charity work.

Sino-Vatican Agreement Possible but Timing Not Tied to Olympics

15. (C) The Ambassador stressed that China should take steps to improve relations with the Vatican. Wang said he believes China should respect religion and that the Vatican should recognize "historical factors" that complicate its relationship with China. On this basis, Wang said, China and the Vatican "should be able to reach agreement" on issues

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that have impeded normalization of relations. Wang said he is "confident the Sino-Vatican relationship will improve," but noted that the timing of any improvement is not tied to the 2008 Olympics. "Internal affairs" at the Vatican are "very complicated" and the Vatican frequently changes its positions, Wang alleged. SARA sent a private letter thanking the Pope for his decision not to meet with the Dalai Lama in December 2007. Wang said SARA understands that the decision not to meet was difficult for the Pope, and said that China "should recognize good things" such as this.

16. (C) Wang said that the biggest obstacles to normalization of Sino-Vatican relations include disagreement over the appointment of bishops and the Vatican's recognition of Taiwan. The Vatican maintains that Taiwan is not a problem since it is willing to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing. But, Wang said, Taiwan remains a problem for Beijing because China wants resolution of the Taiwan issue before settling the issue of bishop appointments. According to Wang, "both sides think these issues can be resolved."

Protestant Christianity and Buddhism Growing Rapidly; Folk Religion Adherents Also Numerous

17. (C) Wang said China's fastest-growing religions are Protestant Christianity and Buddhism. Statistical evidence suggests that Protestantism has the fastest growth rate, and the expansion of Christianity in China outpaces that of most other countries. Wang said the number of Chinese Buddhists has also increased rapidly but this number is harder to quantify. Wang estimated that there are 100 million believers of all faiths in China, based on hard data and softer approximations. It would be too sensitive for China to attempt a more accurate count, Wang said, because overseas media would complain that China is requiring individuals to disclose their religious affiliation.

18. (C) Wang said that folk religions have "very deep roots"

in China and acknowledged that some experts believe the number of persons practicing folk religion is as great as the number of persons adhering to China's five official religions. China "appreciates" folk beliefs and does not seek to "administer" them, Wang said. Folk beliefs, Wang stated, are unlike the "heresies" some Chinese religionists spin from Western religions.

Church Registration More Complicated Than Western Media Portray

¶9. (C) In response to the Ambassador's inquiry regarding conditions for Chinese Protestants, Wang said that registration of Protestant Christian groups is "complicated" in China. Western media oversimplify the situation by classifying Protestant groups as "official congregations" or "house congregations." But, Wang said, some groups choose to meet in homes because they live too far from a church to attend conveniently. The Chinese Government does not "manage" these groups. Practical obstacles to building churches sometimes prevent registration for groups that would otherwise qualify under the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs. SARA, for example, must negotiate with other ministries to obtain approvals allowing churches to be built. Some groups avoid registration because they have "bad relations with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement" or because they receive adequate overseas funding and want to remain independent of the CCC. Leaders of other groups oppose registration for self-interested reasons, fearing that it will cut off sources of income. At the "grass roots level," Wang said, many Protestants do not understand that they should register. Wang said SARA conducts educational campaigns urging registration as a means of obtaining protection under the law.

SARA Leaders May Visit the United States in 2008; CCC Soon To Appoint New Leaders

¶10. (C) VM Wang is considering two invitations to travel to the United States in 2008, one from several Baptist organizations including the Baptist World Alliance and the other from the Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). Wang particularly wants to attend activities sponsored by DTS, which will address relations between major world religions and focus on improving relations between U.S. and Chinese religious organizations. VM Wang said that DTS has built good relationships with SARA, the CCC and Protestant churches

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in Beijing. Some Chinese church leaders do not want Wang to accept the DTS invitation because they believe DTS is "too conservative" socially and because they reject the strict DTS interpretation of the Bible. If the DTS trip is to take place, Wang said, he must persuade Chinese Christian leaders that his visit should go forward despite these theological differences.

¶11. (C) VM Wang said SARA Minister Ye Xiaowen may travel to the United States during the first half of 2008. Minister Ye is considering a trip during which he would sign a cultural exchange agreement with Georgetown University and attend the February launch of a book by Christian evangelist and author Luis Palau. Wang also thanked the Ambassador for the Embassy's help in facilitating prior U.S. visits, including the Chinese Bible Exhibit that toured the United States in ¶2006. Wang said the Exhibit resulted in visits by more than 20 U.S. religious groups to China in 2007 and that he expects an additional 10 delegations to visit China in 2008.

¶12. (C) Wang said that on January 8, the CCC will open national meetings to appoint new leaders to replace those leaders who have reached 75 years of age and thus, according to the CCC's charter, must retire.

RANDT